



GRADUATION: The Measure of Tomorrow

65TH CONFERENCE ON EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

Session 3

Autism, Our Journey Together, A Message of Hope

Cindi and DJ Svoboda

Below is a link to a YouTube video of an Interview with DJ Svoboda

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5kwwnBiceM>

On the following pages is an article that appeared in the Cary Magazine about

D J Svoboda



‘A’ is for Acceptance

By **Mary Alice Holley**

Imaginative characters share life with autism

If you can dream it, you can do it.

This is Imagiville, where everyone is welcome and accepted for who they are.

Bright colors, a few doodles in progress and one excited, smiling face greet visitors to the studio of D.J. Svoboda, an artist, author and motivational speaker living with autism.

Here, he creates the Imagifriends, characters that make Imagiville a safe and meaningful place for children with special needs.

D.J. was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder and psychomotor retardation when he was just 3 years old. His mother, Cindi Svoboda, was told by doctors that he would struggle with speech delays and simple motor skills.

Like many children with special needs, D.J. was teased, bullied and called names by his classmates, who often didn't understand his limitations or differences.

The negativity inspired him to create something positive, the land of Imagiville, a place in his imagination where everyone is treated kindly and accepted just the way they are.



“We all have a fantastic and wonderful place in this world, and it’s what is inside that matters most,” D.J. said. “I am determined to show others that when given encouragement and hope, we can all use our gifts to make the world a better place.”

Imagiville is also a symbol of what is possible when you aren’t told no. D.J. has been surrounded by the love and support of his family and friends, and no one has ever told him he couldn’t achieve his goals.

Each character D.J. creates is a symbol of his experience, a lesson to be learned. For example, Lucia the flying cow reminds children how important it is to be carefree and not to be burdened by your worries.

“Any kind of negative situation is not permanent,” D.J. said. “Everything is temporary and before you know it, something great and amazing can come out of it.”

Before the Imagifriends were ever created, D.J. was a child who loved to swim at the YMCA and dreamed of becoming a scuba diver. He couldn’t hold a pencil, and no one thought he would be able to practice art.

But one day, D.J.’s teacher encouraged him to try something new. He quickly realized he loved sketching and doodling, and shortly after, the first Imagifriends were born.

Today, D.J. is the face of the Imagiville brand. He has published three children’s books with plans to write more. He travels around the country speaking to families about his experiences and inspires them to dream big.

Here in the Triangle, D.J. visits chapters of the Autism Society of North Carolina, having one-on-one conversations with members about their experiences.

Lisa Kemp’s son Jake, has been diagnosed with autism and ADHD.



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“I first met D.J. at the South Carolina Autism Society Walk for Autism,” Kemp said. “After reading My Imagiville, I bought a copy and talked to D.J. for a few minutes. Jake had only been diagnosed for a few years, so it was still very raw, but after talking to D.J. and Cindi, I realized that no matter what, my son can do amazing things, and we should not let his autism slow him down.”

Svoboda has found her own inspiration from her son’s accomplishments.

“It is difficult for a child with autism to fit into our world. For D.J., it is like trying to fit a square peg into a circular hole, and it just doesn’t work,” she said.

She’s found ways to fit into D.J.’s world and says he has taught her what it means to be patient, understanding and have unconditional love.

For many parents, the Imagifriends and D.J. have become a source of hope that their children can find success and achieve their goals, too.

“Hearing that we’ve given a parent hope through D.J.’s story is so incredible,” Svoboda said. Despite three books and a full schedule of speaking engagements this year, D.J. has no plans of slowing down.

“I imagine the Imagifriends becoming a successful TV show and movie to rock this world,” he said, “and to encourage people to have so much confidence to help them accept one another for who they are.”

Learn more, at myimagiville.com.

Photography By Jonathan Fredin